

## **Postmodernity**

### **Marcus Pound**

Perhaps nowhere has philosophical reflection on modernity, its failure, and what lies beyond, been so keenly observed than in Nietzsche's 'How the Real World became a Myth: the History of an Error' (Nietzsche, 1998, p. 20). The error in question is metaphysics as it pertains to the distinction between the real world (i.e. the super-sensible world of Ideas) and the apparent world (i.e. our contingent material world). The ensuing history charts in six easy steps the shifting dynamic of that distinction. Beginning with Plato, the real world is understood to be attainable in this life, but only to those to whom knowledge has been imparted. With the birth of Christianity – the second step – the real world (i.e. heaven) becomes attainable to all, but deferred: it is achieved only in the after-life and on the basis of penance. We enter the third stage with Kant, where the real world slips even further out of conceptual grasp. Kant's scepticism renders the real (i.e. noumena) indemonstrable, and heaven a mere postulate of practical reason, something that at best can be posited by way of obliging us to act morally, but unknowable nonetheless. The fifth stage appears with the birth of positivism; i.e. the attempt to build a picture of the world purely on the basis of what we can empirically verify. With positivism, the real world loses all moral force and quickly translates into the fifth stage: nihilism; the real world is now no longer good for anything. What remains then asks Nietzsche? 'The apparent world perhaps? But no! With the true world we also have abolished the apparent one' (Nietzsche, 2007, p 20).

In short, to lose the metaphysical as it pertains to the distinction real/apparent, is to lose the meaningfulness of the very distinction, thereby unmooring representation and leaving our attempts to account for the world adrift, neither reducible to materialism or idealism: the postmodern.

Postmodernism appears to present something of a double-bind for theology. On the one hand, when we lose the distinction real/apparent, we also lose something of the positivist basis upon which religion has traditionally been critiqued. It cannot be the case of clearing away the cobwebs of superstition to reveal the apparent world of the 'purely human' (Milbank, 2006, p. 9); when the 'purely human' loses its status *as* apparent the secular narrative descends into just that: a narrative, a fable, a myth; one more competing myth amongst myths. Hence, as Zygmunt Bauman suggests, following the 'protracted and earnest [...] struggle to dis-enchant' the world, postmodernity seems to induce a 're-enchantment of the word' (Bauman, 1993, p. 33).

On the other hand, the 'wager of representation' – that a sign refers to a depth of meaning guaranteed by God – no longer stands: God too appears as nothing more than a sign amongst signs and the whole system becomes weightless (Baudrillard, 1983, p. 10).

In what follows I want to suggest that this double-bind is highly characteristic of postmodern philosophy, highlighting its form within the work of two postmodern thinkers: Jacques Derrida and Alain Badiou; the former, an Algerian Jew educated in France, whose practice of deconstruction was designed to resist the metaphysical absolutes of modernist thought through an appeal to the semiotic play of language and an ethical awareness of Otherness; the latter, a French atheist whose work explores the procedural conditions by which a universal truth is arrived at. Derrida is a thinker of difference against the background of sameness; Badiou is a thinker of sameness within the conditions of multiplicity.

In both cases particular attention will be given to their handling of reason and faith as a means for further theological reflection. My argument however is that while the postmodern represented here has provided the condition for the return of religion, what returns is stripped of its collective and institutional framework. In short, they collude with the modern suspicion of institutional religion and hence the possibility that religion is anything other than a

subjective faith. To this extent postmodern philosophy is shown to be a deepening of modern liberal tendencies, unable to represent the plurality it appears to herald.

By way of introduction I turn briefly to Jean-François Lyotard, who brought the term 'postmodern' into common parlance, and Martin Heidegger, the German phenomenologist of Being whose 'destruktion' of metaphysics and differential ontology serves as the genealogical basis for much of postmodern philosophy.

### **Lyotard: Incredulity towards meta-narratives**

When it came to reflect upon discontent with the political project of emancipation that characterised modernity, 'the postmodern condition' was not Lyotard's first choice of terminology. Rather, he spoke of 'lessons in paganism' (Lyotard, 1989). In the same way the pagan's believed in many gods as opposed to one God, Lyotard wanted to emphasise the multiplicity and plurality of narratives, events, and judgments, over and against a single coherent trajectory. Lyotard abandoned the term paganism for the 'postmodern condition' to highlight critical reflection on modernity.

Simplify put, the postmodern condition is one of 'incredulity towards meta-narratives' (Lyotard, 1984, p. xxiv). Incredulity toward meta-narratives does not imply incredulity toward narrative per se; rather, Lyotard's concern is the way knowledge is legitimised through recourse to a single overarching narrative 'such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth' (Lyotard, 1984, p. xxiii). This, according to Lyotard, is what constitutes the 'modern'.

Lyotard gives cultural expression to one of the key elements of postmodern thought: multiplicity. Against the 'One' of modernity (one nation, one people, etc.) he views the shape

of postmodernity to be constituted by the recognition of multiple voices. To put it in Nietzsche's terms, when we lose the real of modernity we are left not with a single apparent world, but the sheer multiplicity of competing narratives.

### **Heidegger: The genealogical root of postmodern philosophy**

Lyotard's cultural observation finds a correlative voice in the philosophical critique of metaphysics developed by Martin Heidegger. For Heidegger, metaphysics is onto-theology. What is at stake in onto-theology is firstly the question of being; i.e. that which can be univocally predicated of all beings; and secondly, being's conflation with the 'highest Being': God, the causa sui which sustains beings as a whole. As the ground of being, Being gives beings their 'actual presencing', serving as the 'transcendental making possible of the objectivity of objects, as the dialectical mediation of the movement of absolute Spirit [Hegel], as the historical process of production [Marx], as the will to power [Nietzsche]. (Heidegger, 1986, pp. 242-243). In short, for Heidegger philosophy has been shaped by a 'Metaphysical concern with identity as wholeness, and Being as the ground of that identity' (Ward, 1997, p. xxxi). And the history of Western philosophy is the history of repeated attempts to channel 'comprehension of the world (finitude) or of religion (God/infinity) through the presupposed and existing supremacy of the horizon of Being and its referential benchmark for 'thought, reason and knowledge' (McCaffrey, 2009, p. 114).

Heidegger set philosophy on a path of destruktion (Heidegger, 1962, p. 44).

Destruktion is not simply a negative term; it implies a loosening up of the ontological tradition, the attempt to think Being and hence identity as difference, and in this way, think that which has been left unthought and concealed by metaphysics (Heidegger, 1969, p. 65).

In this way, Heidegger moved philosophy beyond its primary concern with epistemology ontology.

### **Derrida: The destruktion of modernity**

Heidegger's thought provides the groundwork for Derrida and one of the most striking philosophical movements to be identified with postmodernity: deconstruction. Derrida shares Heidegger's view that the Western philosophical tradition has been characterised by onto-theology which defines being in terms of presence (Derrida, 1981, pp. 9-10). An object is only to the extent it is presentable or self-present to-itself – and this includes consciousness. Deconstruction 'interrogates' the 'determination of Being as presence or as beingness' (Derrida, 1986, p. 413).

The novelty of Derrida's approach lay in his reception of Heidegger within the context of structuralism. Structuralism was given shape by Ferdinand de Saussure's defining analysis of signs which treated language and culture in terms of a self-contained system of signs as distinct from their reference to a given reality. Language is a system, and meaning is generated by virtue of a sign's oppositional relation/difference to other signs within that structure as whole (Saussure, 1986). Derrida's approach was to show how 'the place of language in the philosophical systems of the West (from Plato to Hegel) functions as a micro-cosmic crystallisation of larger metaphysical assumptions' (Smith, 2005, p. 17; See also Derrida, 2005, p. 353).

While the implications of structuralism decentre the subject (i.e. the subject is not given in-itself but by virtue of its relation within a persistent structure), Derrida argued that the very concept of 'structure' smuggled back in certain onto-theological presupposition. Structures are organised around a centre which secures the structure as whole, whilst

remaining unaffected by the structure. The centre thereby ‘closes off the play which it opens up and makes possible’ (Derrida, 2005, p. 352). The centre, whilst variously defined, be it ‘arche, telos, energeia, ousia (essence, existence, substance, subject), aletheia [truth], transcendental, consciousness, or conscience, God, man, and so forth’ is nonetheless ‘always designated the constant of a presence’ (Derrida, 2005, p. 353). This is the metaphysical assumption at the heart of structuralism.

One way to understand Derrida’s relation to structuralism is in terms of the relation of postmodernity to modernity offered by Lyotard. Derrida’s work serves to address the way modern linguistics implicitly falls back upon a master signifier to legitimise its practice. Hence, while Derrida shares many of the insights of structuralism such as the relational structure of meaning, Derrida is often situated under the banner of post-structuralism.

Derrida’s early work took to task the privilege of speech over writing as the fundamental conceit of western metaphysics. From Plato onwards, the philosophical tradition has consistently devalued writing in favour of speech as the site of truth (i.e. presence). Speaking is somehow viewed as more immediate to consciousness and therefore closer to the truth; writing is mediation, thereby threatening the unity of self-presence. Making the voice the site of presence shields it from interpretation, and renders knowledge a matter of recalling presence (Derrida, 1976, p. 8; Smith, 2005, p. 39).

Derrida refers to this metaphysical assumption in terms of logocentrism, recalling the Greek assumption that Logos related immediately to meaning (Derrida, 1976, p. 11) – part of the wider philosophical attempt to shift the object of knowledge (i.e. truth) out the contingent and material world and into the realm of ideas.

Yet as Kevin Hart explains, Derrida’s conclusions upset the metaphysics of presence, affirming instead the ‘non-coincidence’ of meaning and being through the critical deployment of différance (Hart, 1997, p. 161).

‘Différance [with an ‘a’] is neither a word nor a concept’ (Derrida, 1986, p. 400). The French verb differre has one of two meanings – identified in the English by two separate words: the action of putting off (i.e. to defer), and in this sense to temporalize; and to be non-identical, to be Other (i.e. differ). Derrida’s neologism makes up for this semantic deficiency in the French: différance can refer simultaneously to the entire configuration of its meaning; it is immediately and irreducibly ‘polysemic’ (Derrida, 1986, p. 401).

The deployment of différance ‘precedes all grounds, while resisting becoming another ground precisely because it forbids self-identity’ (Hart, 1997: 161). To explore différance within a text is, not unlike Lyotard, to raise the question regarding the legitimacy of the master-signifier, and it does this by discerning precisely the ‘trace’ (i.e. the very mark of an absence) within a given text.

The thrust of Derrida’s appropriation of Heidegger is ethical: violence is the result of absolute truth claims; i.e. a claim underwritten by presence. By contrast, a differential ontology highlights being’s relation to an Other, and the process of deconstruction is precisely that: to unconceal the Other in its Otherness.

### **Derrida and a/Theology**

It is not difficult to view Derrida’s critique in the manner of negative theology. Derrida’s concern for différance, discontinuity, and multiplicity displays an unrequited spirit, suspicious of the positive predications which were traditionally secured within metaphysical presuppositions. Yet Derrida is preceded by a classical tradition which includes the likes of Aquinas, the Divine Names of Dionysius, and Meister Eckhart. Negative or apothatic theology attempts to describe God on the basis of articulating what he is not instead of what he is, because as finite creatures we cannot recognise God’s attributes in any real sense: God

is beyond what we can positively predicate of him. As Derrida puts it: ‘Negative theology has come to designate a certain typical attitude toward language, and within it, in the act of definition or attribution, an attitude towards semantic or conceptual determination’ (Derrida, 1992, p. 74).

Yet Derrida resists a strict correlation: Différance ‘is not theological’ (Derrida, 1986, p. 400); it is irreducible to any ‘theological’ re-appropriation (Derrida, 1982, p. 6). The problem with negative theology is simply that it is not negative enough. Negative theology remains a discourse of the hyper-essential, a ‘wager on onto-theological comprehension’ (Coward & Foshay, 1992, p. 4) because any denial is still in service of a deeper affirmation of what remains ‘proper’ to God. In other words, negative theology is still reducible to positive theology (Rubenstein, 2003, p. 391) whereas deconstruction ‘blocks every relationship to theology’ (Derrida, 1981, p. 40).

Despite this, Derrida recognises a certain ‘family resemblance’ based upon the notion of ‘faith’ (Derrida, 1992, p. 74). By ‘faith’, Derrida is not implying a certainty of belief in a determinate religious proposition. Rather, faith concerns a commitment to the process in which a space of un-decidability is opened up. In other words, the decision of faith for Derrida is precisely the decision for uncertainty.

### **Derrida and Levinas: The ethics of deconstruction**

To clarify the above, Derrida’s writings on both Emmanuel Levinas and Marxism are instructive. Much of the ethical thrust of Derrida’s work has been developed in admiration for the work of Levinas. As Derrida suggest: ‘the thought of différance implies the entire critique of classical ontology undertaken by Levinas’ (Derrida 1986, p. 413).



According to Levinas, moral reasoning tends to assume the knowing self-present subject who, in his or her relation to an Other, tends to diminish their distance, reducing the Other to sameness on the side of the subject. Kant's categorical imperative can be easily read in this manner to the extent it compels the individual to judge his action on the basis on others making the same judgements – universalising the particular. For Levinas by contrast ethics is not about deploying a universal judgement any more than moral consciousness is about a given set of values. Rather, ethics is a critical enterprise which arises through an encounter with the 'face' [visage] of an Other.

Why the face? Because, speaking phenomenologically, the face, unlike other objects, shines with an irreducible 'alterity' [altérité] which calls us to responsibility. As Simon Critchley's succinct summary puts it:

For Levinas, then, the ethical relation – and ethics is simply and entirely the event of this relation – is one in which I am related to the face of the Other [...] the other human being whom I cannot evade, comprehend, or kill and before whom I am called to justice, to justify myself. (Critchley 1999, p. 5)

While Derrida's account of différance overlaps with Levinas, Derrida nonetheless discerns a central problematic: given our infinite responsibility to the face of the Other, how do we adjudicate between competing obligations? In other words, what happens when there is another face – a 'third' triangulating the initial relation? For Derrida, the imposition of a 'third' serves to protect against the overwhelming responsibility to the face of the initial Other, and introduces properly the realm of politics (Derrida, 1997, p. 31).

What remains then of ethics? Derrida's response is not to seek some mediation between the two, but to radicalise the split; i.e. our task is to live in the tension between our

divided responsibilities, to be continually haunted by the relation to a 'third' and in this way resist the closure of ethical responsibility.

### **Religion without Religion**

Like many of his generation, Derrida remained deeply influenced by a certain 'spirit in Marxism' which he was unable to renounce: 'it is not only the critical idea or questioning stance [...]. It is even more a certain emancipatory and messianic affirmation' (Derrida, 1994, p. 89).

Faith becomes in Derrida's oeuvre both a critical venture, and a desire for a type of justice, a 'waiting without a horizon of determinate expectation' (Caputo, 1997, p. 135); a passion for the impossible. And because faith believes beyond the structures of determinate expectations, it is a faith that 'pushes us beyond the sphere of the same' (Caputo 1997, 133). So while Derrida initially blocks the relation of theology, it is not long before he confess his own 'religion without religion', inaugurated through the spirit of faith and the promise of justice bereft of determinate and institutionalised form.

### **Derrida: Faith and reason**

The opened ended nature of interpretation offered by Derrida might suggest that deconstruction entertains a faith devoid of reason. Yet this is not his aim. Instead, faith belongs to a critical experience which encourages an open disposition, an experience of a future which is necessarily indeterminate, 'desert like [...] given up to its waiting for the other and for the event' (Derrida, 1994, p. 90). And 'the chance of this desert [...] is to uproot the tradition which bears it, to atheologize it; without denying faith, this abstraction

frees a universal rationality and a political democracy which is indissociable from it' (Caputo, 1997, p. 156). In other words, deconstruction is not so much against reason, as the calculable and determinate form reason is given when underpinned by onto-theological considerations. In this way, as Smith puts it, Derrida restores the 'honour of reason' linking it to 'an obligation being has with the Other' (Smith, 2005, 86).

### **Kantian Suspicions**

While Derrida shows the importance of faith to reason, he nonetheless maintains an opposition between faith and determinate religion. What of religion that returns in this world is not the institutional practice which given form to faith, but a faith devoid of metaphysical import. This has an important bearing when viewed in terms of the wider debate on political liberalism within postmodernity.

Liberalism in the West, for reasons to be explained, while seeking to accommodate plural viewpoints, has often been seen to work against such inclusion when it comes to religion. The argument goes something like this: modernity is intimately related to: a) the rise of secularism, by which is meant the loss of institutional religious forms, and b) the exercise of autonomous rationality.

The latter finds expression in Immanuel Kant's attempts to clarify the nature of the Enlightenment: 'Enlightenment is man's release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man's inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another' (Kant 1995 p. 1). Where man, according to Kant, had previously lacked the basis for self-direction, a new found confidence in his rational powers now brought with it the promise of social emancipation. And this was given decisive political expression in the West with the doctrine

of liberalism: equality before the law; subjects are treated as equals, which is to treat them individually.

Yet liberalism is further underlined by a division between the public and the private sphere. The public realm assumes a neutral quality, thereby legislating for the freedom to adopt critical rationality in the public realm; by contrast, it is in the private realm that the subject may adopt an uncritical religious belief or doctrine as he or she sees fit. In short, the loss of institutional religion in the public sphere is compensated for by its award in the private. Again, this is given expression in the work of Kant who argues:

The use, therefore, which an appointed teacher makes of his reason before his congregation is merely private, because the congregation is only a domestic one (even if it be a large gathering); with respect to it, as a priest, he is not free, nor can he be free, because he carries out the orders of another. But as a scholar, whose writings speak to his public, the world, the clergyman in the public use of his own reason enjoys an unlimited freedom to use his own reason and to speak in his own person. (Kant, 1995, p. 4)

In this way liberal democracy has become synonymous with a secularising impulse in which the social role of religion becomes increasingly diminished by relocating religion within the private interior, thereby replicating the split between reason and faith in terms of the public and private. The believer is, 'quarantined', her affinity with a religious community compromised, and the 'transmission of a collective religious heritage' obstructed (McCaffery 2009, p. 33).

The antinomy not to be missed here is that where postmodern philosophy has increasingly moved to decentre the individual through *différance*, liberalism has increasing

pushed in the opposite way, shoring up the subject in a rights-based theory: religious expression is less about a critical enquiry as saying something pre-determined and fixed about one's identity. However, what unites these two approaches is that in both cases, the return of religion is made without reference to institutional forms. Hence Derrida's 'religion without religion' begins to sound suspiciously like the new-ageism 'I am spiritual, not religious'. In other words, the debate may be less about the distinction between a fixed or unfixed identity, as the secular reasoning which allows the inner complicity between two mutually opposing views.

### **Badiou: The 'Act' of faith**

At the other end of our postmodern spectrum is the work of Badiou. Badiou's work addresses, in true revolutionary fashion, the question of an 'act' which breaks the bonds of ideological interpellation. Like Derrida, Badiou is a thinker of difference: Being is irreducibly multiple, not transcendent but finite. However, he frames his question not in the usual postmodern fashion (i.e. how to exercise contingencies against modernity's absolutes?), instead: given the prior multiplicity of Being, how does a universal truth arise in the first place?

Much of Badiou's work takes its conceptual direction from mathematics, but it is to St Paul he turns when fleshing out a working model for the concerns. The key lies in Badiou's approach which theorises a procedural account of the 'event' of truth. 'Truth' in this context does not concern the adequation between knowledge and its object; it is the process itself that matters. At the heart of a truth procedure is an 'event' or trauma, an unpredictable encounter which breaks with the existing situation thereby escaping conventional representation. As

such, an event is neither calculable nor demonstrable by terms outside of the event; it rests not on an eternal ground, but the mere fact of its occurrence.

In St Paul, it is the declarative power of Christ's resurrection which constitutes the event, throwing up a gap of uncertainty which, according to Badiou, could not be accommodated by existing Jewish and Greek thought. And it is this uncertainty upon which a subject must rest a conviction, henceforth declaring his or her faith in the event.

In the act of faith the subject gives continuity to the event and becomes a subject as such. That is to say, the subject is a subject only to the extent he or she maintains fidelity to the event. The subject does not pre-exist the event, indeed, it is precisely the 'extrinsic conditions' of a subject's existence or 'identity' that Badiou counters (Badiou, 2003, p. 14); rather, it is what the subject says that founds the singularity of the subject' (Badiou, 2003, p. 53).

Post-event, the process of truth becomes one of infinite verification, a constant examination within the situation of the consequences of the wager upon which the event was decided such that the subject (what Badiou refers to as an 'apostle') persists in that Truth. Hence Christianity is not deemed true to the extent it conforms to external or transcendental criteria (i.e., there really is a God?), but whether its participants maintain fidelity to the event of the resurrection in such a way as to organise a new field of experience.

The subtitle of Badiou's book on St Paul is "The Foundation of Universalism":

Something is universal if it is something that is beyond established differences. We have differences that seem absolutely natural to us. In the context of these differences, the sign of a new truth is that these differences become indifferent. So we have an absorption of an evident natural difference into something that is beyond that difference. (Badiou, 2005, p. 38)

‘Indifference’ here is not the dispassionate neutrality of the secular sphere in which differences are ‘respected’, ‘tolerated’ or ‘accommodated’, his position is more radical: indifference arises because no moral judgement is being offered; the event literally renders previous markers irrelevant; they simply cease to matter in the old way. This is the meaning of Paul’s claim in Galatians that ‘there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female – for all of you are one in Christ Jesus’ (Galatians 3: 28).

What then of difference? ‘The acknowledgement of difference is itself founded on a subjective disposition that comes from Paul’s experience of declarative difference in the Event of resurrection that differentiated him from others’ (McCaffrey, 2009, p. 220). In other words, difference is principally the difference of the event.

### **Badiou and Ethics: From difference to sameness**

The significance of Badiou’s account comes to the fore when set against the postmodern ethics of alterity. In an affront to the postmodern concern for the Other, Badiou states: ‘the whole ethical predication based upon recognition of the other should be purely and simply abandoned’ (Badiou, 2001: p. 25). What is at stake here can best be put with reference to the simple question: what constitutes a political act? Often, an apparently transgressive act can work not so much to challenge an existing situation as reinforce it. Think for example how disregarding road law is often the very mechanism which allows the traffic to run smoothly.

On Badiou’s reading, Derrida’s ethics of Otherness does not introduce anything new into the political field – it merely maintains that liberal differences should be respected in an attitude of openness. For Badiou such positions can only represent particularity, not

universality, and thereby contributes to identity politics; i.e. in support of marginalised groups who make foundational appeals on the grounds of a given identity or rights such as such as gender or religion.

Hence, where the thrust of Derrida's critique is shaped by an apophatic openness to the Other, Badiou offers a decisionist ethic. The ethical imperative shifts from observing Otherness and uncertainty to making a wager on an uncertain event. Again, it is not that Badiou does not value difference, but that the liberal respect of difference does not do justice to the qualitative difference set in process by a truth procedure, and hence the real question is not how to recognize differences but 'recognizing the same' within a field of multiplicity that genuinely constitutes a difference (Badiou, 2001, p. 25).

### **Badiou: Faith and reason**

However, the most critical distinction between Badiou and Derrida lies in their respective relation to theology: where Derrida evacuates the institutional husk of theology in favour of the distilled kernel of justice and faith, Badiou's claim is that it is precisely the dogmatic claims of religion which matter over an against an unmediated kernel.

On first sight, Badiou's philosophy appears to vindicate Nietzsche's prediction: Being as event, or to employ Badiou's term 'grace' simply arrives; it is unfathomable, a happening to us, and to which the subject must respond. Hence Badiou readily assigns St Paul's work the status 'fable' (Badiou, 2003, p. 4). However, as Geoffrey Holsclaw highlights, what Badiou also does is provide a means of 'discerning fidelity' which unites a subjective disposition with dogma (Holsclaw, 2010, p. 240), as well as maintaining the centrality of history (the event) without succumbing to historicism. In doing so, Badiou appears to offer



Christian theology a path out of its exile between modern rationalism and the postmodern fideism of Derrida.

### **Post-Secularism: Faith and Reason**

In sum, both Derrida and Badiou contribute to a re-invigoration of theology. Derrida appears to offer a path beyond the deconstruction of metaphysics, reconstituting faith as a paradoxical openness to the Other that maintains a messianic kernel; Badiou makes St Paul productive for politics precisely in its dogmatic claims; in both cases religion puts the revolution back into politics. Moreover, both highlight the importance of faith to reason: for Derrida it is faith's uncertainty; for Badiou it is the decisionist element of faith.

What unites these thinkers however is the double-bind: the re-enchantment of philosophy at the expense of metaphysics. Both maintain an opposition between faith and determinate religion: Derrida wants a faith void of religion; Badiou wants dogma without faith. What of religion that returns in this world is not the institutional religion which gave rise to faith, but a faith not circumscribed by metaphysics.

### **Postmodern Theology?**

Postmodern philosophy has arguably carved out a new space for theological reflection, and a revitalizing of theology in its wake. Yet a problem remains, the forms of its return accentuates liberal trends which ensure religion remains privatised, void of institutional framing and political import.

However, as suggested if, à la postmodernism, all claims to truth, including the social sciences, are contingent, then the claims of secular social-theory have no right to primacy

over the claims of theology: both are founded in mythos, and the difference pertains to which one can invoke the imaginative capability to prioritise peaceful differences. While Liberalism is able to accommodate the postmodern subject, the postmodern subject is still unable to accommodate religion, merely tolerate it to the extent it remains a private pursuit devoid of politics.

What then of an alternative space in which differences could coincide? To answer this we need only return to Heidegger and pose two related questions: first, why accept his account of metaphysics and onto-theology in the first place; second: is the association of metaphysics with Christianity a given in the way the postmodernists suggest?

These are the questions posed by Phillip Blond with the suggestion that Heidegger's narrative about the forgetting of Being masks the relational account of being already underway within the Christian metaphysical tradition of the middle-ages. For Blond, 'an account of being as presence, which itself relies upon the forgetting of ontological tradition, is not to be found in any properly figured account of the Christian tradition up to Thomas Aquinas' (Blond, 2002, p. 280); rather, 'it is only the modern epoch which appears to have forgotten being' (Blond, 2002, 282).

Blond draws on the work of the French Jesuit Henri de Lubac, and John Milbank, amongst others to suggest that the metaphysics which Heidegger disdains, has its foundation in the theological sundering of nature and super-nature in the late middle-ages, a diremption which remained foreign to most patristic and medieval thinkers for whom nature and grace were paradoxically intertwined. Theologians had every good intention in sundering the two. To conflate God and nature is to undermine the possibility that creation is a free gift from God. Yet as Milbank argues, it is a short step from here to a full-bloodied secular autonomy of the natural realm which can only explain its cause in terms that are immanent to itself (Milbank, 2006).

Theology meanwhile is increasingly consigned to the super-natural, of which only revelation can secure its status. The transcendent primary-cause of Greek and Christian thought subsequently becomes something to which only immediate intuition or institutional authority can directly appeal to; whereas secondary causes (i.e. nature) becomes its own self-enclosed realm, unable to transcend its condition and hence distinguish between truth and illusion (Blond, 2002, p. 282). The result of this modern separation is a legacy which permits only ‘unmediated appeals to the absolute’ or ‘the random desire of elements’ (Blond, 2002, p. 283).

On this reading, secularisation is the not so much the result of abandoning theology, but results from a specifically theological turn, so to return to this rupture is one means by which to begin to sketch an alternative genealogy of metaphysics.

A similar point, although differently put, can be found in the criticisms of Derrida by Oliver Davies and Denys Turner: ‘negative theology resonates positively with a deeply rooted trend in contemporary religiosity towards the privatisation and internalisation of religion’ (Davies and Turner, 2002, p. 2). Derrida accepts the comparison of his work with negative theology only insofar as apophatic theology defers meaning indefinitely and stripped of all reference to a transcendent God. Yet negative theology was marked less by the refusal of an hyper-essentialised God, and more as a corrective to the ‘exuberant excess’ of the Divine Names generated through liturgical and biblical interpretation: ‘Being cancelled in this way, these are shown not to be ordinary language use at all but speech that is burdened to the point of excess: as exhausted as it is full.’ ((Davies and Turner, 2002, p. 3).

By contrast, Derrida’s denial is limited by the theology it denounces: onto-theology who has little bearing on the world, and whose negation merely consigns one to modern atheism.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to begin to the constructive task, it needs only to be said that what Heidegger, Derrida, and Badiou fail to even consider is the medieval doctrine of participation: creation is not self-existence but has existence by virtue of God's grace. Creation is real, but not as distinct from God, it is only real to the extent it participates, which is to receive itself as gift: the more we participate in God, the more human we become. And because this was further shaped by the relations within the Trinity, Christianity was able to link first causes with secondary causes in a way which avoided the metaphysical dogma attributed to it by Heidegger (Milbank and Oliver, 2009, pp. 13-24).

My point then is that Heidegger's 'forgetfulness of Being under the weight of onto-theology obfuscates an alternative theological account which resisted precisely that scheme. Of course, it cannot be a question of returning to pre-modern narratives, because theology must now speak within the conditions of radical immanentism, yet an awareness of participatory metaphysics may allow the creative space for a more critical alternative to postmodernism.

## **Conclusion**

Thus far I have surveyed two principal postmodern philosophers. What connects them is their post-metaphysical shift. In the work of Derrida transcendence is turned into a personal responsibility for the Other which mediates a wider justice to come; in the work of Badiou, the event is articulated on the basis of a dogma.

In both cases we have a reconfiguration of reason and faith. Where modernity was apt to separate out reason and faith, Derrida uses faith to restore dignity to reason, whilst Badiou offers a discernment of the role of faith in establishing the conditions for a universal truth. Both do away with the intelligible rationalism of God, translating our thinking about

faith and reason into a renewed awareness of the contingency and the responsibilities of world building. Derrida revises faith as a critical venture against certainty; Badiou revises the dogma of resurrection as the basis for universal truth in the postmodern soup of particulars.

Yet at the heart of these philosophies is the passing of institutional religion, and a deepening of the lines drawn by modernity between immanence and transcendence, absence and presence, the public and private. So while postmodernism heralds the death of the autonomous rational subject, it quickly oscillates to become a revelation-based philosophies, only now revelation takes on a purely fideist colouring. If we are then to move beyond postmodernism, might we not exercise incredulity toward the narrative that it offers amongst others?

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